



# Munich Rising

There's more to the Bavarian capital than meets the eye. DIANA HUBBELL explores the many unexpected sides of a city steeped in ancient history and contemporary cool

I REACH THE UNMARKED door just as the rain begins to pound. A blonde woman, swaddled in mink and dripping with jewellery, opens it a crack. After studying my invitation, she crooks a gloved finger and I cross the threshold into another era.

Under the light of a crystal chandelier, the roaring '20s are in full swing. Ladies in gowns and gentlemen with bow ties are ascending a marble staircase. No expense was spared in recreating these flapper fashions – the strings

of pearls and ostrich feathers are real, the beaded frocks vintage. I follow the crowd to a ballroom where, on the stage, a burlesque dancer draped in diamonds and not much else fans her embroidered train like a peacock.

This covert gala would feel right at home in London or Paris, but I am in neither. Instead, I'm in Munich, a place outsiders seldom associate with such glamorous decadence. While graffiti-spattered Berlin seduces with its gritty, bohemian brand of cool, the Bavarian capital tends to earn more recognition for its robust economy and six million-visitor "harvest festival". In other words, while the *Hauptstadt* flaunts its "poor but sexy"

cachet, Munich gets slapped with decidedly less-than-sexy labels. *Monocle* named it the world's most livable city in 2007 and 2010 due to its "investment, high-quality housing, low crime, liberal politics and strong media." It's an admirable distinction, but one that, frankly, sounds rather dull.

In my experience though, the city is anything but. For the past few years, I have lived a double life, splitting my time between an apartment in Berlin's Kreuzberg-



Neukölln neighbourhood and another in Munich. And as much I love the capital, I find myself more and more often succumbing to the southern city's undeniable charms. Though the former may be one of Europe's fastest growing tourist destinations, the latter is one of those seldom seen places where people don't just enjoy a high quality of life, but really know how to live.

This is, after all, where surfers ride a permanent wave in the dead of winter and chefs work wonders with wild game and foraged edibles. The venerable four-century-old Hofbräuhaus, arguably the most iconic beer hall in the world, still stands, but cutting-edge cocktail bars and sushi restaurants now line the side streets. In the summer, the populace migrates en masse to the lush banks of the Isar River and

nearby lakes like Starnberger See, while winter months bring Christmas Markets with fairy lights and steaming *Glühwein* – mulled wine. With celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the *Reinheitsgebot*, Bavaria's sacred beer purity law, underway this year, there's never been a better time to visit.

"For our size, the amount of choice in Munich is quite big. And not just in the stereotypical chichi, high heels way," says Niels Jäger. If you're searching for the creative core behind the city's luxe façade, Jäger's is a name to remember. A former bouncer and longtime nightlife baron, he and his business partners Sascha Arnold and Steffen Werner, an architect and graphic designer, made a splash more than a decade ago when they launched a pop-up nightclub called ZKV in the opera's old ticketing office on ritzy Maximilianstraße.

"More importantly, people are on the whole quite mellow and friendly," he adds. "The Munich crowd is all about sitting outside with sunglasses, no matter what time of year."

These days, the crew's empire includes no fewer than six venues across town, including a locavore restaurant, Cantine Cantona, and a craft cocktail bar, James T. Hunt. The crown jewel in the collection, however, is The Flushing Meadows Hotel & Bar, a seven-year pop-up endeavour with Design Hotels.

When creating Flushing Meadows, Jäger and his partners wanted to stay as far away from blandly posh as possible. They chose the industrial site of a former post office in the buzzy Glockenbachviertel district and enlisted the help of the coolest people they knew. Each of the 11 loft studios owes its unique aesthetic to a different creative. DJ Hell's room is decked out in black; professional surfer Quirin Rohleder includes a beachy hammock; and actress

Birgit Minichmayr added a video projector with her favourite flicks.

"We chose people we respect in different ways," says Jäger. "Many of them are kind of close too. We used to share a space with Norbert Wangen (an industrial furniture designer) when we were still younger and hustling. And Cathal McAteer (the founder of Folk) is my best friend from childhood. Everybody kind of brought their own personal focus into the project."

It's a stark contrast to more traditional grande dames, such as the Mandarin Oriental Munich. A cocoon of classical luxury, this five-star boasts superlative extras including a Turkish steam bath, Finnish sauna, and a rooftop pool with peerless views in the summer months. The place could easily coast on its reputation alone, but opts instead to build on it, adding perks like a fleet of Mercedes-Benz bicycles so guests can circumnavigate the city's 1,200-plus-kilometres of bike paths. Best of all, the hotel welcomed a slick Peruvian-Japanese restaurant by Nobu Matsuhisa last fall. One taste of the tea-smoked lamb will dispel any notions that Munich is all about pork knuckles and bratwürsts.

### THREE GREAT PLACES IN MUNICH



#### Explore the Deutsches Museum

Interactive exhibits on science and technology are engaging enough to pry children away from their smartphones, making this an ideal outing for the family. There's so much to see and do here that you may need to plan for multiple visits. [deutsches-museum.de](http://deutsches-museum.de)



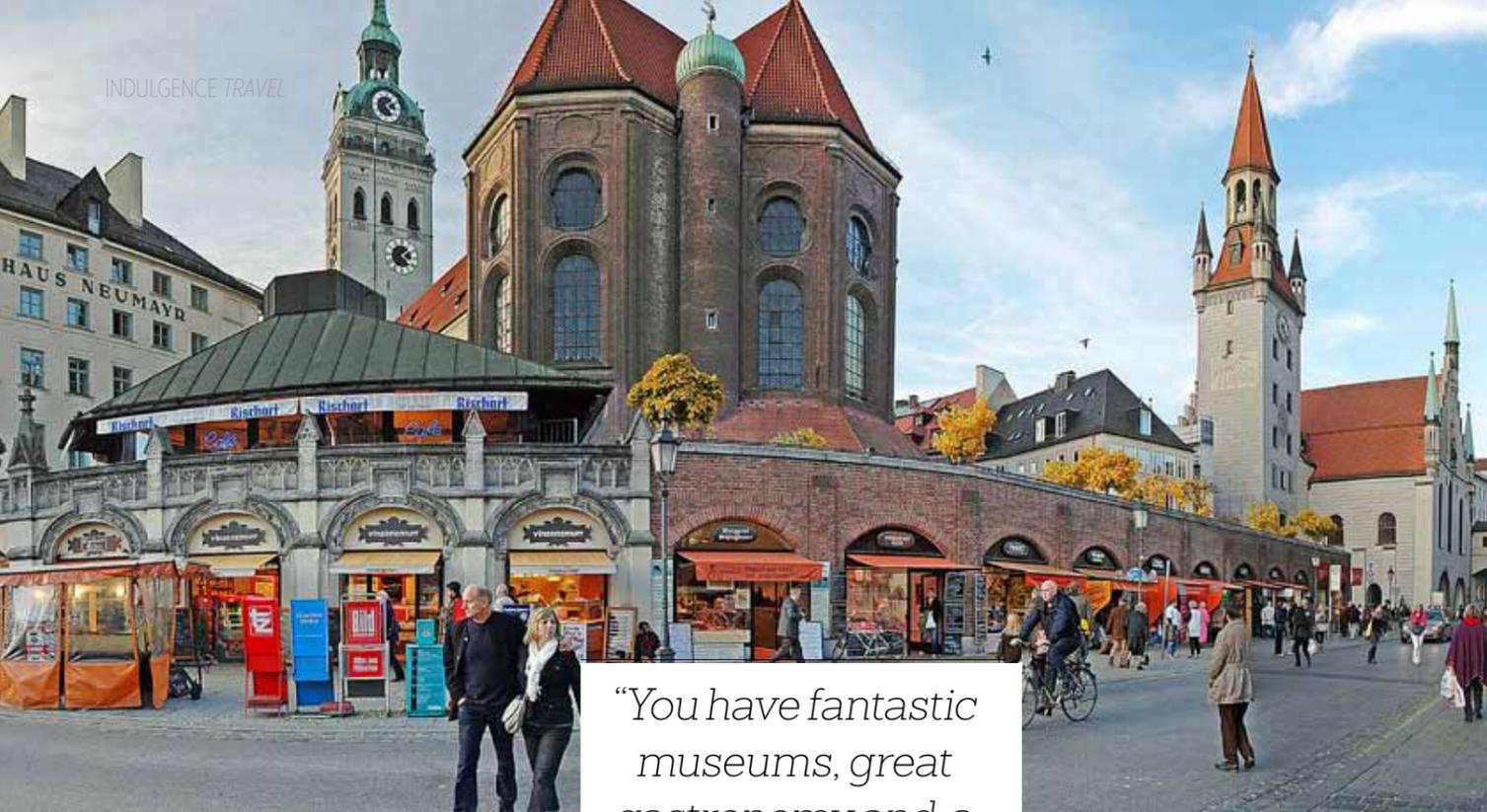
#### Have a beer at the Chinese Pagoda

A trip to one of the city's 180-plus beer gardens is an essential part of any visit. One of the loveliest is situated at the *Chinesische Turm*, a wooden pagoda at the heart of the English Gardens. Order a *Maß* (liter) of beer or a *Radler* (half beer, half lemonade). The latter literally translates to "the cyclist," in honour of anyone hoping to leave the premises sober enough to ride home.

#### Experience *Freikörperkultur* on the banks of the Isar River

Despite numerous "*Baden Verboten*" (no bathing), the crystal-clear waters of Munich's river fill with swimmers on warm summer afternoons. Nudity is prohibited, but that's never stopped less-inhibited locals from diving in wearing nothing but their birthday suits.

THIS PAGE (FROM THE LEFT): MANDARIN ORIENTAL MUNICH; AND OVERHEAD SHOT OF MUNICH BIKE PATHS IN A PARK.



*“You have fantastic museums, great gastronomy and a thriving creative scene*

#### BARS AND NIGHTLIFE

“I’ve lived in Munich for 40 years and I’ve sworn I’m leaving for the last 20,” says Charles Schumann. A debonair gentleman in his seventies, Schumann’s eponymous bar has been an icon for decades and his six books, including *American Bar: The Artistry of Mixing Drinks* are still considered indispensable for mixologists in multiple countries. With his silver hair slicked back and his tailored suit slightly undone, he manages to come across as stylish without giving a damn. “But I don’t, because it’s such a comfortable place. They say Munich’s the best city in Germany to live in, and that’s probably true.”

Schumann hasn’t merely watched his city’s cocktail culture mushroom; he’s been an incremental part of its development. For years, he’s cultivated talented mixologists that have later gone on to found places like Bar Gabányi, where off-duty bartenders go to drink. His newest venture is a Tokyo-style speakeasy with more than 150 types of whiskies called Les Fleurs du Mal. What he loves most about Munich

though has nothing to do with its after-hours scene.

“This city’s so close to the Alps and it’s so green. In summer, everyone is outdoors and it feels almost Italian,” he says. It’s hardly surprising, given that Münchener are only a three-hour drive from the border. Some have been known to hop over at lunchtime for pizza. “Sometimes we even like to say we’re the third largest city in Italy.”

*La dolce vita* is particularly noticeable at the new Eataly München, a plush outpost of the global gastro-empire that opened last November in Schrammehalle. In this iron-and-glass encased former granary, gourmands sip Aperol Spritzes and nibble on *arancini*. On my visit, I savour a gutsy Piedmont red and struggle to avoid loading stocking up on artisanal fig bread and fragrant olive oils. Tempting as the culinary shopping here may be, the offerings outside are even grander. At Viktualienmarkt, piles of leeks, radishes and other pristine produce are arranged to resemble still life paintings. I may have been able to pry myself away from Eataly without spending a fortune, but in all the years I’ve visited, I have never managed to leave this

gourmet haven empty-handed.

With such a profusion of fine ingredients, it’s hardly a surprise that Munich’s culinary scene is a force to be reckoned with. My first stop in town is inevitably Wirtshaus zum Straubinger, a local eatery that has been serving the same rib-sticking fare for decades. The menu follows the seasons, with wild duck breasts buried in fresh porcinis surfacing in the fall and fat, ivory stalks of asparagus napped in velvety hollandaise in spring.

Munich’s beautiful people, meanwhile, are more often spotted preening over dry-aged slabs of beef at Panther, a steakhouse par excellence, or Burger & Lobster Bank, where glinting security boxes attest to its past as an actual bank. The latter may be the only place where I have ever eaten the world’s favourite fast food with a fork and knife. Barely contained by a brioche, these burgers are a messy affair for a setting where most guests are sipping Champagne.

Somehow, that doesn’t detract from the fun. On weekends, the bar is swamped by blondes in bandage



dresses and executive types. Potent cocktails, buoyed by infusions like walnut-steeped Maker’s Mark, provide the necessary social lubricant and by midnight the party is going strong. In warmer months, DJs spin in the restaurant’s courtyard until whenever the last man standing calls it a night.

#### A THRIVING CREATIVE SCENE

DJs and disco are all very well, but a city cannot survive on its nightlife alone. Fortunately, Munich’s cultural scene is as vibrant as its nocturnal one. Berlin’s lower rents may lure artists, but galleries like Lothringer 13 Halle and Kunstraum are where they sell their work. Graffiti artists like Shepard Fairey and Banksy have made recent appearances, and there are rumours of Art Basel coming to town.

“What I love about Munich is that although it’s a small, it’s still a real city,” says Laura Hertreiter, a journalist for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Though she grew up in a village, she moved to Munich for university and never has looked back. “You have fantastic museums, great gastronomy, and in places like Maxvorstadt, a thriving creative

scene, with small galleries and younger artists.”

Galleries are just one of the ways in which Munich displays its impressive collection of art. Out of its 80-plus museums, the Haus der Kunst stands out both for its daring exhibitions and its controversial past. Originally constructed in the 1930s as a showcase for the Third Reich’s propaganda, the building has since undergone multiple overhauls, including a 2.3 billion Baht facelift in 2014. Rather than whitewash that dark period, the museum’s curators chose to confront it, deliberately leaving a few garish hallmarks as reminders.

After touring the exhibits, I find myself at the most glaring example of the site’s history: the Goldene Bar, a swank cocktail den wallpapered in bombastic, gilded maps from the Nazi era. Like the rest of the place, it is stunning, provocative, and more than a little uncomfortable.

I settle onto the terrace outdoors, where a fashionable crowd can be seen sipping Lillet-based aperitifs overlooking the English Gardens. Not far away, wetsuit-clad surfers ride an artificial wave next to a river bridge. Known as the *Eisbachwelle* (“ice brook wave”), this rare inner-city attraction draws die-hards and spectators regardless of the weather. Many arrive before dawn to catch some action before commuting to work.

I like to think of this spot as a microcosm of the city itself: refined yet adventurous, modern yet laden with history, surrounded by greenery, full of contradictions, and anything but dull. **■**



#### BANGKOK TO MUNICH IN STYLE



Thai Airways offers daily, direct flights between Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Munich Airport. Taking around 11-and-a-half hours, the journey is as comfortable as could be inside the airline’s top-of-the-line Boeing 747s. For those wanting to spoil and pamper themselves, Royal Silk (business class) and Royal First Class offer superlative services, starting the moment you check in. Enjoy a lavish experience above the clouds, too, replete with gracious Thai hospitality, some of the most spacious cabin suites available on any airline, a specially curated wine list and delectable cuisine.

[thairways.com](http://thairways.com)